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2 September 1965

MEMORANDUM FOR WATCH COMMITTEE MEMBERS

SUBJECT: Information from PAVN Prisoners

1. In furtherance of our continuing effort to focus greater collection effort, research and reporting on the North Vietnamese Army and its methods of operation in Laos and South Vietnam, we are attaching herewith two summaries of recently available information obtained from a total of 12 PAVN prisoners captured in 1964 and early 1965 in Laos, one group from the 335th Brigade and the others from the 304th Division. Together they have provided more information on the introduction and operations of specific PAVN units in Laos than has ever been available previously, as well as considerable information relating to the North Vietnamese Army.

2. We believe that this information is of more than historical interest and has provided some useful insights into PAVN methods of operation in Laos in general and which may be of more than incidental relevance to recent and future infiltration of PAVN units into South Vietnam.

3. Specifically, we believe these interrogations, together with cumulative information which has been obtained from recent infiltrators into South Vietnam, tend to support the following conclusions:

a. The PAVN has developed a system for the movement into Laos and South Vietnam of regular army units in battalion strength, which may be dispatched at any time, leaving behind in the DRV either the major elements of the parent division or brigade or merely a nucleus which serves as a cadre for the recruitment and training of additional units.

b. There are indications that this system, which has probably been employed in Laos for years, was extended to South Vietnam in 1964 when the supply of regrouped southerners was apparently virtually exhausted. It seemingly could provide a method for the continuous dispatch of regular PAVN battalions and the formation of new ones within the existing division/brigade order of battle structure without the creation of any additional major PAVN units. The movement of probably all infantry elements of the PAVN 325th Division into South Vietnam thus far is an exception to this method of operation.

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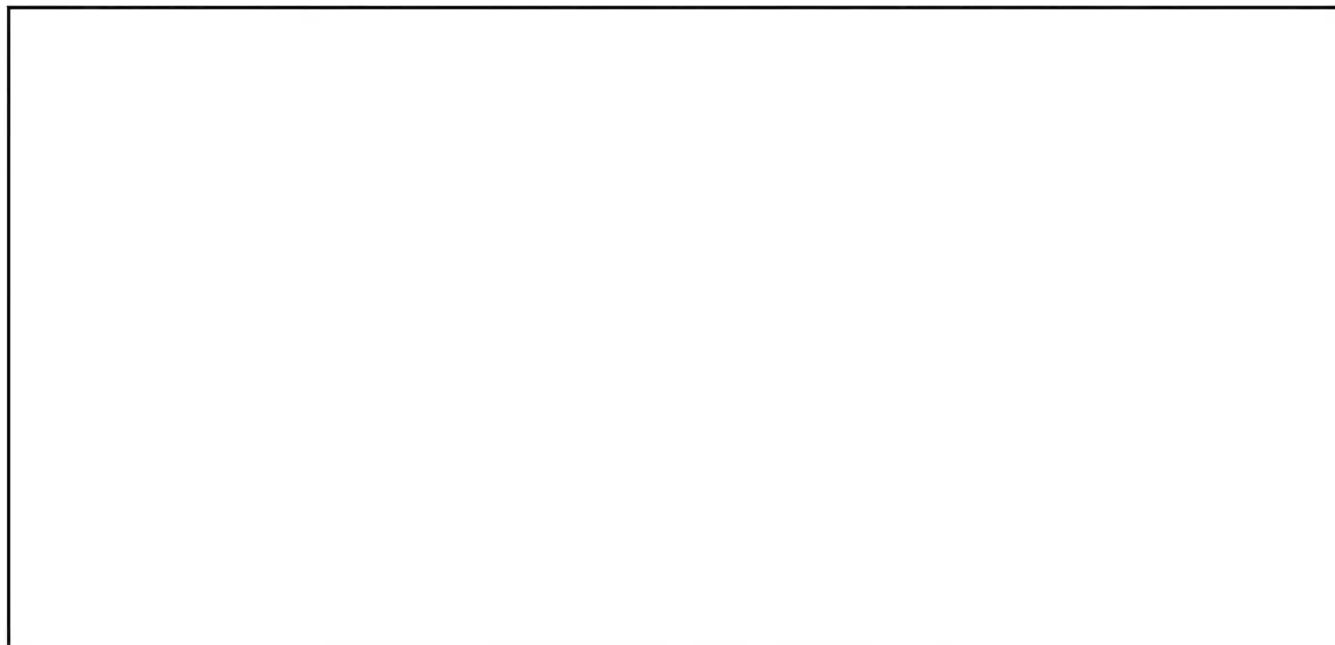
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e. The interrogations of the prisoners from the 304th Division provide some basis, although tenuous, for believing that in 1965 North Vietnam was dispatching units to Laos and possibly South Vietnam which included substantial numbers of new recruits who had received little military training and political indoctrination as to their missions. This could have reflected a sudden requirement to move more troops into Laos and South Vietnam.

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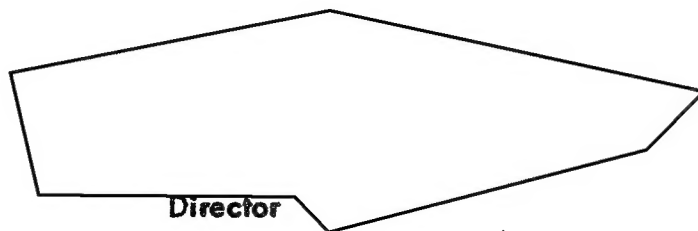
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5. The attached summaries, which are Confidential only, may be removed to permit wider distribution.

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STORY OF A PAVN UNIT -- 3D BATTALION, 9TH REGIMENT,
304TH DIVISION

On 9 March 1965, Communist forces estimated at 400 to 500 PAVN and Pathet Lao attacked Dong Hene on Route 9 in the Laos Panhandle. Although the town was defended by only 80 men attending the local military academy, the result was a spectacular government victory, largely because of highly effective RLAf support of the defenders. Friendly forces were reported to have buried 112 enemy dead and other reports placed Communist casualties even higher; the enemy retreated from the area and has not since attempted a major action along Route 9. A byproduct of the action was the unprecedented capture of nine North Vietnamese prisoners, whose detailed interrogations have recently become available and provide the basis for the following account.

Comment on the sources: Of the nine prisoners, seven were from the 3d Battalion, 9th Regiment, PAVN 304th Division, Ninh Binh. Three of these were unable to name their regimental or divisional subordination but it was clear from their other statements that their battalion was subordinate to this regiment. Three were members of the 12th Company of the 3d Battalion, and one each was from the 11th Company, 13th Company and the heavy machine gun platoon of the 3d Battalion. The affiliations of the other two prisoners are obscure; one had come from a training unit at Lac Quan, Nam Dinh Province, and the other claimed to have come with a "2d Independent Company" from Bach Mai (a suburb of Hanoi).

All sources were privates with very limited or no formal education (one had reached the sixth grade), had come from small villages or farms, apparently had very little knowledge of or interest in the political situation in North or South Vietnam and no military knowledge beyond their immediate units. They ranged in age from 17 to 25. The longest military service any had had was about two years, seven had been in the army for a year or less, and of these four had been called up since November 1964. Despite these obvious limitations on their value as a source of information on the PAVN, the men within the limits of their knowledge gave generally consistent stories, and were cooperative. There appears generally to be no reason to question the validity of the information which they gave and which is believed more reliable than the first cabled reports received last March of their initial interrogation.

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Movement of the 3d Battalion, 9th Regiment, 304th Division into Laos: The men from this battalion are in agreement that they left Ninh Binh, North Vietnam, between 2 and 4 February 1965, after a few days or hours notice that their units were going on a military operation. Three said they were told that they were going to South Vietnam, one that they were going to the South to assist in the "war of liberation," while all others (including the two men from the units at Lac Quan and Bach Mai) were told only that they were going on an unspecified military operation. None was told that they were going to Laos and some never learned that they were in Laos until after their capture.

The men's stories leave little doubt that the entire 3d Battalion left Ninh Binh. All stated that their whole platoons or companies departed, and none referred to the assignment of any cover designations or infiltration group numbers such as have usually been given to groups headed for South Vietnam. The men traveled in PAVN uniforms, taking with them their individual weapons, ammunition, an extra uniform, other personal equipment, and rice rations. They departed Ninh Binh in trucks driven by PAVN soldiers (not assigned to their units), with one platoon (about 20 to 30 men) to a truck and accompanied by extra trucks which carried food.

Although this movement began several days before the start of US air strikes on North Vietnam, the truck movements south from Ninh Binh were made entirely at night, and the men dispersed into the jungle to sleep during the day. In addition, the trucks were completely enclosed to prevent observation by the troops of the route they were taking.

As a result of these security measures, some of the men had no idea as to where they entered Laos or in fact that they had. From the reports of others who were able to trace the route, however, and the time required for the trip, it is evident that the 3d Battalion entered Laos via Route 12 and the Mu Gia Pass, and that all companies arrived at the Laos border at about the same time. The men variously stated that the trip by truck took from four to six nights, after which their units left the trucks and proceeded on foot. One man stated that his platoon travelled 10 to 11 days by truck and was well inside Laos when a supply truck hit a mine and the men then disembarked. It appears that the other platoons probably left the trucks at about the Laos border or close to it. From then on for nearly a month, the men moved on foot largely or entirely at night through the jungle and deserted villages, marching by platoons and usually seeing no other troops from the battalion or any other people. From their lack of reference to movement on a road, it appears that they did not travel down Route 23 but along jungle trails.

About 0300 on 8 March all three companies of the 3d Battalion apparently reached Dong Hene after marching all night and attacked immediately. (Reports at the time gave the date of attack as 9 March but interrogations consistently give 8 March.) Although some of the men were unaware of the presence there of any units other than their own platoons or companies, two sources reported that the three companies met at Dong Hene and attacked together, and one reported that two Pathet Lao companies also

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participated in the attack. Among the PAVN dead was the commander of the 3d Battalion. Most of the prisoners stated they were wounded in the early stages of the action, became separated from their units and were captured several days later after wandering in the jungle. None apparently had any idea of the plan for the attack, had not rehearsed it or trained with any of the other attacking units, nor had they apparently received any information on what they were to do.

Possible movement of other elements of the 304th Division: Two of the prisoners claimed that two other battalions of the 9th Regiment (the 1st and 2d Battalions) had also left Ninh Binh, allegedly for South Vietnam, within a day or two of the departure of the 3d Battalion. One stated he had been told this by his platoon leader, and the other did not say how he knew it. Neither source had apparently witnessed the departure of any other elements of the 9th Regiment and had no further information on such a movement. Contrary to the first cabled reports, none of the sources reported that elements of any other regiment of the 304th Division had left for South Vietnam. The sources had no information on any other regiments of the division. Except for the report from the prisoner who claimed to have moved with the "2d Independent Company" from Bach Mai to Dong Hene, there is no indication that any other PAVN units participated in the Dong Hene attack.

PAVN conscription and terms of service: All men are eligible for conscription in their 18th year and thus may be called up at age 17. None of the sources had volunteered for the Army; all had been conscripted. Four said their terms of service were for two years, four had been drafted for three years, and the other did not know his term of service. One stated that for healthy recruits the term is three years and for others less physically fit, it is two years. The subjects reported that they had received medical examinations which they considered quite thorough prior to induction; they generally had no idea what percentage of men were conscripted although one believed that 70 percent of those examined were not accepted for military service. Three of the men inducted had previously been deferred, two because the family needed his assistance and the other for medical reasons. Normally callups do not occur until after the Vietnamese New Year (early February); however, two of the sources had been called up in January 1965 which was apparently considered somewhat unusual.

Training and equipment: Sources confirmed that the SKS 7.62mm semi-automatic carbine (either the Soviet or Chinese model) is standard equipment in PAVN infantry units. The heavy machine gun platoon of the battalion also was equipped with three Soviet 7.62mm heavy machine guns and the AK assault rifle. None of the men knew of any radio or other communications equipment at company level although some believed there might be radios at battalion level.

Not only the new recruits (two of the prisoners had left Ninh Binh after only a month's service) but also the men with longer service appear to have had extraordinarily little training to prepare them for guerrilla warfare in either Laos or South Vietnam.

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Although equipped with modern rifles, some had never had live firing practice and most of them had fired live ammunition only once. They had little tactical training and apparently none at company or battalion level, very little if any night training, and little practice in live grenade throwing or assembly or disassembly of their weapons, and apparently none in guerrilla warfare, camouflage or more sophisticated subjects.

Political indoctrination: Although some subjects reported attending political lectures (one had attended four during 18 months at Ninh Binh), they had received very little if any indoctrination concerning the war in South Vietnam or North Vietnamese assistance to the Viet Cong. None mentioned being given any instruction prior to the departure of their units or en route as to the purpose of the war in South Vietnam or Laos or why they were being sent.

NIC comments: It would be hazardous to draw any sweeping conclusions from the statements of these low-level sources concerning either the general level of training in the PAVN or the infiltration of units into Laos and South Vietnam. Nonetheless, certain tentative assessments may be made:

1. There are several reasons to question whether this battalion was in fact en route to South Vietnam at all. The normal route of groups or units moving to South Vietnam is well to the southeast of Routes 12 and 23, entering Laos just north of the DMZ and following a series of trails close to the South Vietnamese border (generally close to new Route 92 and its connecting routes into South Vietnam). In addition, some infiltrators in recent months have reported moving directly across the DMZ. It is believed that no infiltrator has ever reported that he moved through the Mu Gia Pass and down or close to Routes 12 and 23. The sources also travelled in full PAVN uniform whereas units destined for South Vietnam normally are reequipped with different clothing in the southern DRV prior to starting the infiltration trek and are also assigned cover numbers or new designations. Just why a unit en route to South Vietnam would be sent such a circuitous route as the 3d Battalion's and diverted to launch an attack well to the west even of Route 23 is obscure, unless it was simply to give the men some "combat training" in an operation which was probably regarded as a pushover by the Communists. In any event, the battalion apparently sustained such heavy casualties that it is doubtful, if it was en route to South Vietnam, that it arrived as a combat-effective unit. There is only hearsay information that two other battalions of the 9th Regiment had left for South Vietnam although this could of course be correct. If so, their route of movement is unknown.

2. The fact that all known overland infiltration into South Vietnam has followed trails to the southeast of this unit's and that the 3d Battalion apparently did not walk down Route 23 but followed trails through the jungle only increases the mystery of what has become of the several thousand PAVN troops reported by road watchers to have either moved by truck or walked down Routes 12 and 23 during the past nine months. It would appear that only a portion of these can reasonably be accounted for as AAA units, road repair units or replacements for casualties in southern Laos.

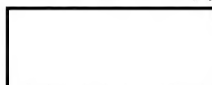
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3. If these prisoners are a representative sample of the troops in the 3d Battalion, it would indicate that North Vietnam in early 1965 was sending very poorly trained and indoctrinated units into Laos and possibly South Vietnam. This in turn would suggest an increased requirement for manpower for South Vietnam. It may be that the steps taken by North Vietnam within the past few months to extend PAVN terms of conscription and increase the numbers of men inducted into the armed forces, as well as to increase the training of the militia, are intended as much to raise the quality as the size of the armed forces.

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OPERATIONS OF THE PAVN 335th BRIGADE IN LAOS (1964) AND
GENERAL INFORMATION ON THE PAVN

In September 1964, three PAVN prisoners, all members of the 335th Brigade (home station Moc Chau, DRV Military Region Northwest) were captured near Tha Thom, Laos. These three prisoners present an interesting contrast with those from the 304th Division in that all were far more knowledgeable on their units and the situation in the DRV in general, had considerable useful information on the PAVN, and were better trained and seemingly more intelligent.

Entry into Laos and operations of the 335th Brigade: All prisoners were from the 1st Battalion, 335th Brigade. One had entered Laos on 1 March 1964, when the bulk of the battalion arrived; the second entered about 1 July 1964 with a group of about 150 replacements for the 335th Brigade; the third arrived in Laos in August 1964.

All sources reported that their movement from Moc Chau to Laos was via Route 6 to Thanh Hoa, and thence via Routes 1 and 7 into Laos to Khang Khay, the total trip consuming less than 10 days by truck. The source who arrived with the group of replacements stated that a stop was made at Muong Sen (on Route 7 in the DRV near the Laos border) for the troops to change into Pathet Lao uniforms; the other sources apparently did not comment on whether they wore PAVN or Pathet Lao uniforms in Laos.

Two of the sources gave virtually identical information on the structure of the 335th Brigade as composed of: five infantry battalions (numbered 1st, 2d, 3d, 4th, and 7th), two artillery battalions (numbered the 10th and 12th), an engineer battalion (the 13th), plus other support companies.

The entire 1st Battalion (minus one company which moved later) apparently left Moc Chau about 21 February 1964 for Laos. The source who left at that time stated further that by September 1964, five battalions of the 335th Brigade (the 1st, 2d, 3d and 7th infantry battalions and the engineer battalion) were all in Laos, together with the brigade headquarters which was established at Khang Khay. One of the other men had heard that all infantry battalions and the engineer battalion of the brigade were

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operating in Laos in 1964, but probably not artillery battalions. The 335th Brigade field hospital was permanently stationed at Khang Khay.

The source who left Moc Chau with the remaining company of the 1st Battalion in late August has provided some interesting information which may help to explain how the "same" battalions of various PAVN units have sometimes been reported moving into South Vietnam more than once. He stated that his company remained behind until a new unit of three companies had been formed; he did not know whether it was organized into a battalion. The brigade in 1964 thus appears to have been split into a forward brigade headquarters at Khang Khay and a remaining group at its home station at Moc Chau which may have been serving primarily as a training unit for the formation of new units. The sources apparently did not know or did not state whether the brigade commander had moved to Khang Khay. However, one of the men stated that the commander of DRV Military Region Northwest, Lt. Gen. Bang Giang, was in Khang Khay in June 1964. PAVN operations in upper Laos are directed by the commander of this military region, while PAVN operations in central and lower Laos are directed by the Commander, Military Region IV.

The battalions of the 335th Brigade evidently played a major role in the Communist offensive which drove the Kong Le and FAR forces from their positions in Xieng Khouang Province in the spring of 1964. The first source reported that his unit participated in the attacks on Phou Nang and the Plaine des Jarres. The 1st Battalion was subsequently moved to the Muong Ngan area near Tha Thom where the sources were captured in the successful Lao Government operations in mid-September 1964.

Until this operation, where the PAVN forces were hampered by heavy rains, supply seems to have been adequate. Apparently most of the supplies for the PAVN units were trucked in from North Vietnam. The sources reported minimal or no contact with the Pathet Lao, raising a question as to whether the numerous reports from Laos of combined Pathet Lao/PAVN units are accurate and suggesting that PAVN units probably operate largely independently.

PAVN conscription: The sources report an annual conscription, usually in February, although actual inductions apparently may be delayed in some cases. Two of the men, as well as one of the prisoners from the 304th Division, reported various classifications of men eligible for conscription, as follows: A-1 - no physical defects; A-2 - minor defects but acceptable; A-3 - serious ailments and acceptable for service only in times of emergency or great need; B or B-1 - physically unfit and not acceptable for service; and C-- disabled. (Thus, any references to the callup of men from the A-3 category should be watched as an indicator that emergency conscription is under way and would probably signify that considerably accelerated callups had been initiated.) The sources all reported service in the militia as compulsory for men not accepted for regular army service.

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Assignment of new APO numbers for foreign service: It was reported that units were assigned new APO numbers on transfer to Laos and that these carried a different letter suffix (NY for Laos as opposed to SK numbers in the DRV). However, it is not clear whether there is a permanent set of special letter suffixes for DRV units operating in Laos.

Recruitment for service in South Vietnam: One of the sources reported that in his unit only volunteers were sent to South Vietnam and not all who volunteered were selected. Personnel could submit written requests to be sent to South Vietnam at any time; those selected were told not to expect to return home before the end of the war. Three months' special training was given men selected for service in South Vietnam. Many individuals had been sent to South Vietnam from the 1st Battalion. In addition, he reported that a new battalion, the 8th Dien Bien Phu Battalion, had been organized from veterans of this campaign in June 1963 and sent into South Vietnam.